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Statistical capacity-building

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted to the Statistical Commission in accordance with a request of the Commission at its thirty-sixth session.[a] It provides an overview of the approach of the United Nations Statistics Division adopted in its statistical capacity-building programme and reports on technical cooperation activities in 2004-2005. The report is submitted to the Commission for information. The Commission may wish to take note of the report.

[a] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2005, Supplement No. 4* (E/2005/24), chap. I.B.

* E/CN.3/2006/1.

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I. Introduction

1. Over the years, the Economic and Social Council and the Statistical Commission have provided the United Nations Statistics Division with strong mandates for technical cooperation.[1] At its thirty-sixth session, the Commission strongly supported the proposed strategic focus for technical cooperation activities of the Division. It further stressed the need for technical cooperation to be demand driven, responsive to local conditions, nationally owned and better coordinated. The Commission recognized that there is a role for the Division to play in donor coordination and recommended that the Division, together with the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities, carefully review what coordination mechanisms would be most suitable and effective.

2. The Commission has also continuously stressed the critical importance of statistical capacity-building in the context of increasing national and international demand for development information and has been closely monitoring progress in that area. In particular, at its thirty-sixth session, it requested the Division to produce an assessment of the ability of countries to produce individual indicators on all Millennium Development Goals and has asked the Division to report regularly to the Commission on that assessment, beginning at its thirty-seventh session. In addition, resulting from the monitoring requirements for the Millennium Development Goals and the United Nations Development Agenda, there has been an increased awareness of the importance and urgency of building statistical capacity in less developed countries in order to ensure the measurability of progress towards those goals and to inform the necessary policies and plans to achieve them.

3. The present report describes programme activities undertaken by the Division to address the main points raised by the Commission as reported above. In particular, it provides an overview of the programme approach to capacity-building; reviews the technical cooperation activities of the Division in 2004-2005, including a brief description of funding mechanisms; and briefly summarizes the response of the Division as well as the Inter-Agency and Expert Group meeting on Millennium Development Goals Indicators, in relation to countries' priorities in capacity-building activities and methods of coordination.

II. Approach to and activities in the area of statistical capacity-building

4. The mission of the capacity-building programme of the United Nations Statistics Division is to assist Member States in building strong national statistical systems, which in turn are the building blocks of a solid global statistical system. The Division focuses on efforts that are nationally owned, demand driven and tailored to local needs, as well as effectively coordinated among the various international donors. The three main components of the statistical capacity-building programme — building national statistical systems, supporting good statistical governance and knowledge transfer — are described below.

A. Building national statistical systems

5. An effective statistical system that can meet key requirements for results-based management and all other data needs for the country must include the following two elements: (a) structural factors: an effective and well run national statistical service, based on an appropriate legal and institutional framework, sufficient financial and human resources and a functioning information technology (IT) infrastructure; (b) programme factors: a regular programme of data collection and analysis, including population censuses, integrated household survey programmes, civil registration systems and compilation of economic statistics. The Division assists countries in these areas through training, advisory services and regional and subregional projects that aim to strengthen the capacity of national statistical offices and improve South-South and intraregional cooperation.

6. In addition, the Division offers direct assistance to countries in their efforts to develop a national plan to build statistical systems for the production and dissemination of timely and reliable data. In 2004-2005, it received and responded to several such requests. In order to improve the services provided to countries the Division convened teams of international experts to respond to each country request. The teams then proceeded to provide the necessary assistance to the country under the leadership of the Division. Originally, it had been envisioned that a full-time interregional adviser on the development of national statistical systems would be recruited to lead that process. However, it was subsequently decided that the use of short-term consultants to conduct those specific missions would be more appropriate and effective.

B. Building good statistical governance

7. A sound statistical system requires adequate supporting legislation, appropriate institutional arrangements and an adequate level of human resources and technology. In addition, the national statistical office should be fully independent and have a clear mandate for the collection, processing and dissemination of official statistics that is supported by a strong political commitment.

8. The Division provides advisory services to national statistical offices to help them develop their institutional arrangements, recommending action plans to improve their organizational structure, legislative framework and supporting institutions. Those efforts are integrally linked with the Division's continuing mandate to promote the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

C. Knowledge transfer

9. Statistical capacity-building in domain knowledge is an integral part of the Division's programme and it is closely intertwined with the Division's work on international standard-setting, which allows for an efficient transfer of international standards and practices to developing countries. The Division draws on its technical expertise to provide support to countries in all areas covered by its regular work programme — economic statistics, social and demographic statistics, trade statistics,

environment statistics, development, Millennium Development Goals indicators and monitoring. Methodological development, in particular the preparation of handbooks, is funded through the regular programme of the Division.

III. United Nations Statistics Division activities in 2004-2005

10. In the biennium 2004-2005, the Division organized and funded 28 statistical capacity-building activities, attended by some 1,026 officials from more than 110 national statistical offices. The activities were conducted in collaboration with the regional commissions, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). They covered the following statistical areas: environment statistics, energy statistics, classifications, national accounts, water statistics, disability statistics, population and housing censuses, social statistics, economic censuses, development indicators, poverty statistics, international merchandise trade statistics and statistics of trade in services. In addition, study visits for more than 120 statisticians from developing countries or countries in transition were arranged to provide individual training, reinforce existing networks for the exchange of practical experience and create opportunities for them to participate in international statistical forums. Throughout the biennium, the Division undertook 27 technical advisory missions in the following areas: use of information technology in statistics, statistical organization and management, national accounts, and population and housing censuses. The missions were undertaken by the Division's interregional advisers, currently focusing on national accounts and population and housing censuses, and regular staff.

11. The Division continued the successful implementation of the regional project, funded from the Development Account,[2] in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region (2004-2006), with training workshops on environment statistics, energy statistics and Millennium Development Goals indicators. As in previous years, the Division continues to coordinate and cooperate with existing support activities in the region by the European Union, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the Observatoire économique et statistique d'Afrique sub-saharienne (AFRISTAT). In addition, the Division engaged in preparatory work in connection with a new regional development account project on the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, which is expected to be approved at the sixtieth session of the General Assembly.

12. In order to use its resources effectively and to take advantage of the close link between its ongoing methodological work and technical cooperation projects, the Division makes technical advisory services, workshops and fellowships mutually supportive. The interregional advisers, most seminars and workshops and the fellowship programmes are funded through the regular programme for technical cooperation.

13. The Division has an extensive monitoring and evaluation system, which provides it with feedback in the short term (upon conclusion of the event) and in the longer term (after 6 to 12 months after the event). The feedback received by the

Division over the biennium has been extremely positive. About 78 per cent of respondents to evaluation questionnaires distributed at the end of the workshops stated that they had acquired new statistical knowledge during the workshop. In evaluations carried out after advisory missions, all surveyed countries indicated that the mission had provided their offices with new statistical knowledge. Furthermore, the missions received an average rating of 4.3 (on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being excellent) and all were rated good or above. Responses to follow-up surveys to workshops indicated that participants found them useful or better in regards to their longer-term impact. More than 60 per cent of those respondents stated that they had been able to implement the workshops' recommendations. In a follow-up survey to the Division's advisory missions, it was found that 62 per cent of the recommendations made by the advisers had been implemented.

IV. Coordinating capacity-building activities

14. The United Nations Statistics Division, as mandated by the Statistical Commission, assists in donor coordination in statistical capacity activities. The strategic approach favoured by the Division is that coordination should take place at the country level, based on the national strategy or master plan. Priorities should be defined by the national authority and donors' inputs should supplement Government funding, be driven by countries' requests and cover specific activities only in accordance with the plan. Work to that end has been initiated within the Committee for Coordination of Statistical Activities (see E/2006/30). Preliminary discussions have been held by the Committee on the modality of the coordination. A fuller discussion will be held at future meetings of the Committee. At this initial stage, the Division will assist the International Household Survey Network in creating a database on household surveys that the international agencies plan to conduct.

15. The Division also has an important function in facilitating South-South cooperation and sharing of experience, as well as in promoting the provision of technical assistance from more developed statistical systems. In keeping with the strategy discussed at the thirty-sixth session of the Commission, the Division has promoted a regional and subregional approach to statistical capacity-building programmes to help promote intraregional cooperation and exchange of practical experience relevant to the local socio-economic context.

16. The Division also coordinates the work of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Millennium Development Goals Indicators. The Division and other partner agencies fund the participation of national statisticians from developing countries to the regular meetings of the Group. At the last meeting of the Group, held in Rome on 26 and 27 October 2005, the Division, UNFPA and the World Bank funded the participation of 20 representatives from 17 national statistical offices. Given the large participation of national statistical offices, together with donors and international agencies, that meeting represented a good opportunity to take note of countries' experiences in building statistical capacity and in using statistics for advocacy and policymaking and monitoring, and to agree on priorities in statistical capacity-building for the production and use of development indicators and recommendations to improve the effective delivery of technical assistance and the coordination of support at the national and international levels. The recommendations of the Group are contained in the annex.

V. Conclusion

17. **The United Nations Statistics Division will continue to improve and expand its statistical capacity-building programme. It will report to the Commission at the end of the 2006-2007 biennium. The present report is for the information of the Commission.**

Notes

[1] For instance, in its resolution 2000/27, the Council reaffirmed the importance of national efforts to build statistical capacity in all countries, including through statistical training, and of effective international support in that context for developing countries.

[2] This funding mechanism is provided by the General Assembly; the various development sectors within the United Nations compete for funds by presenting project proposals that have a strong regional capacity-building orientation.

Annex

Summary of recommendations on capacity-building of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Millennium Development Goals Indicators

Eighth meeting, Rome, 26 and 27 October 2005

1. With regard to good practices and ways to improve statistical capacity in countries, the meeting agreed on the need to: (a) strengthen the capacity for data analysis (with international assistance) and improve IT capacity and use; (b) improve coordination with line ministries producing statistics (with the additional challenge of assessing quality of the data they produce); (c) establish a national statistical office that is fully independent and has a clear mandate for the collection, processing and dissemination of official statistics that is supported by a strong political commitment; (d) set up career incentives to retain qualified staff; (e) address the issue of balance between national budget- and donor-supported projects; (f) develop a strategic national statistical master plan which should be based on country's needs rather than be driven by international agencies' priorities and defined by the national statistical office together with all the stakeholders in the country; (g) seek support from international agencies only to cover specific costs in accordance with the plan; and (h) in order for the above to be sustainable ensure that most national statistical initiatives are covered by national budgets and supported by a strong political will.

2. The meeting further agreed on the following recommendations:

(a) Strategic national planning and national strategies for the development of statistics are key to improving statistics. This entails having supporting legislation and governing arrangements and formulating a national statistical plan through a mechanism to involve all stakeholders;

(b) Statistical development should be anchored at the decision-making level. The Millennium Development Goals are used to inform strategies/policies, which in turn should inform statistical systems at the subnational, national and global levels on the statistics that are needed;

(c) Statistical development needs to be sustainable. There is a need to cost each component of a national statistical plan and to promote its funding by the national budget and by donors. Participants stressed the need to improve/increase the retention of qualified staff in national statistical offices and to better transfer skills among staff. Also, the role of the regional commissions should be reviewed and South-South cooperation enhanced;

(d) Good practices in statistics should be enhanced and technical cooperation strengthened. Also, the following issues were recognized as the basis for good practices in statistics: the coordination of data requests needs to be improved; IT needs to be strengthened to improve transparency and to enhance communication; international agencies should rely more heavily on official statistics produced by national statistical offices for their data needs; and coordination by donors, bilateral and United Nations agencies in countries should be improved.